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The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotypes, and the American Indian Woman

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In 2001, Oregon legislators passed Senate Bill 488 (Oregon Laws 2001), making the S-word illegal. While the U.S. federal government does not require the renaming of places called "squaw," Oregon, which has more sites so named than anywhere else in the nation, does. On January 1, 2005, in Curry County, Oregon, Squaw Valley Road became Cedar Valley Road. It was not the property owner's idea. It was not the idea of the county commissioners. It was the law. Not everyone agreed the term was problematic.

My research explores the term "squaw" as an element of discourse that frames a version of indigenous femaleness. I am developing a theoretical perspective of representational ethics for media and popular culture that examines the question of who has the right to represent others, under what circumstances, and in what ways.

Visual and verbal discourse in mass media, popular culture, and everyday life contribute to cultures of discrimination. This phenomenon is well established in mass communication literature. Whether in television programs, films, advertisements, or in popular music such as hip-hop and rap, women are generally absent, underrepresented, or misrepresented. Women of color are often invisible. When Native American women are seen it is usually in one of two stereotypical portrayals: Indian princess (young, female "noble savage") or squaw (older woman or drudge).

A Google search of the term "squaw" in 2008 yielded more than 4.8 million "hits." Some of these are discussions of the word, its etymology, and appropriateness (or lack thereof), but most are links to resorts, casinos, and information about landforms. The word elicits a mixture of revulsion, pity, claiming, desire, and nostalgia. The etymology of "squaw" is complex, contested, and extensively interrogated in both scholarly and popular literature. Neutrality of the portrayal and the term, however, exists only in the minds of the bestowers. Some say the term "squaw" is synonymous with "prostitute" or female genitalia as well as signifying a beaten, ugly, angry Indian woman. While popular and scholarly arguments persist over the term's etymology, and even if its use is no longer consciously connected to its origins, *Navaho Times* publisher and editor Tom Arviso Jr. states, "The most offensive term used to address American Indian women is 'squaw.'"

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Cultural and media-sustained stereotypes of American Indian women (of which "squaw" is one of the most damaging and pervasive) have very real consequences for the lived experiences of Native American women. They influence not only how non-Indians see Indians, but also how Indians see themselves. Yet this media effect has received negligible attention from researchers, scholars, and policy makers. Calling girls and women "squaws" limits imaginative possibilities and narrows self-perception. This has a negative impact on women and girls' access to resources and opportunities for education and professions. Thus, the symbolic representations have very real mental and physical health consequences, contributing to "ethno-stress," a physiological response to the tensions and stress associated with outsider status.

Place names are changing, slowly, as indicated by Oregon and Idaho's legislation. Another example is the 2008 renaming of Arizona's Squaw Peak to Piestewa Peak, in honor of Lori Piestewa (Hopi), the first American Indian woman killed in combat in Iraq in 2003. The renaming was not without controversy. Similar to arguments about sports team mascots, offensiveness of real and symbolic name-calling should be determined by those who are portrayed. As a media effect, stereotyping is an ethical problem.

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A goal of my research is to advance the area of representational ethics as part of a constructive conversation that needs to take place between media practioners, scholars, and those affected by representations. When identity is used to sell products, for example, or as part of everyday information, stereotypical characteristics come to seem normal and natural. If unquestioned or unchallenged, these representations become a kind of truth. Media industries argue they are working toward increased diversity in content and in employment. Along with this is the responsibility to know something about the people represented and hired. While marketing and media presentations are not necessarily responsible for causing prejudice and discrimination, they should be held accountable for those times when they preserve it. Thus, with increased awareness of people's history, and concern for their thoughts, ideas, and identities, scholars and practitioners can better work their way through the challenges of word and image choices when creating media and marketing content. It is my view that what is or is not problematic should always be considered from the perspective of those represented.